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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YAOUNDE 000416

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TAGS: CM ECON KCOR PGOV PHUM PREL ZI  
SUBJECT: CAMEROON UPDATE: AMBASSADOR MEETS PRESIDENTIAL  
ADVISOR PHILEMON YANG

REF: YAOUNDE 313

Classified By: Ambassador Janet E. Garvey for reasons 1.4 (d) and (e)

¶1. (C) Summary: On April 24, Ambassador met with Philemon Yang, Minister Assistant Secretary General at the Presidency. He defended President Biya's decision to change the constitution, said Elections Cameroon (ELECAM) would be established by June and strongly suggested that Biya would not run in the 2011 election. He expressed high hopes for the anti-corruption agency CONAC and said more corruption-related arrests are coming. Mugabe's behavior in Zimbabwe was an "embarrassment," he said. In our view, most Cameroonians remain dejected about the political future, although the French Ambassador is optimistic and believes Biya is preparing his end game. End summary.

Relations with the U.S.

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¶2. (C) Ambassador briefed Yang about her recent Washington consultations and the high level of USG interest in recent events in Cameroon. She noted our disappointment in President Biya's decision to eliminate term limits and growing concern in Washington about the future of democracy in Cameroon. Yang stressed the importance of the U.S. relationship to Cameroon and welcomed feedback when the USG thought Cameroon was making mistakes.

¶3. (C) Biya changed the constitution to eliminate term limits because there was "too much agitation" in the government and the president needed to prepare for his exit, Yang said. According to Yang, the amendment to the constitution giving the president immunity while in office only pertains to "other parts of the constitution," not to criminal activity. The intention was not to offer blanket immunity, which Cameroon wouldn't want "if we ever have a bad president," he said. Yang thought the Senate would be created by the end of the year.

Elections

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¶4. (C) The government is moving ahead with the creation of the Elections Cameroon (ELECAM) by June 30, Yang asserted, adding that it had been allocated 800 million CFA (about \$2 million) as a start-up budget. GRC officials had been studying the Zimbabwe and Kenya situations to avoid their electoral mistakes. He predicted that Cameroon's elections would remain on track for 2011 and strongly implied that Biya would not run again. Yang saw an important role for the political opposition.

Corruption

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15. (C) The government's long defunct anti-corruption agency CONAC now has office space, funding, and computers and is ready to start serious operations, according to Yang. He hoped CONAC would work closely with ANIF (the GRC's lead agency on financial crime issues). The President is committed to making more corruption-related arrests, he said (note: the former Finance and Health ministers and six other officials were recently arrested on corruption charges, per reftel. End note). Yang was pleased that the USG was working with the GRC to help identify and return proceeds of corruption which may be in the U.S.

Politics

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16. (C) Ambassador asked about rumors of an imminent Cabinet shuffle. Yang acknowledged constant rumors of this type and said that the President has made adjustments to his Cabinet over time, but Yang would not comment on whether changes are in the offing in the near future. Ambassador expressed our frustration at the difficulty in getting presidential permission for Cameroonian police to attend USG training; Yang responded that the President had ordered that no police leave the country, except for retired personnel, because there were too few police and the situation in Cameroon was still "uncomfortable."

Zimbabwe

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17. (C) Zimbabwe was an "embarrassment," Yang said. It was hard to understand how the government had not yet released

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election results. He was pleased that southern African countries had refused to allow the offloading of weapons from a Chinese ship, saying this was "the best thing for democracy in Africa."

Comment

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18. (C) The Yang meeting suggested a new sense of confidence in the Presidency. Yang - frequently mentioned as a potential Prime Minister in a cabinet reshuffle - was relaxed, talkative, and passionate about CONAC (which we have yet to see play any role in fighting corruption). French Ambassador Georges Serre this week briefed the Ambassador on his recent meeting with the President, who he described as well informed, fit and alert. Serre thought Biya gave lip service to ELECAM, was primarily focused on the economy, and was furious about the poor performance of the police and gendarmes during the February civil unrest. Serre told Ambassador he is optimistic about the future here (especially comparing Cameroon to other francophone African countries) and convinced that Biya is preparing the end game toward stepping down.

19. (C) We continue to pick up widespread discontent among Cameroonian contacts about the constitutional change and rising commodity prices. There continues to be a strong security presence in Yaounde, Douala and some major roads. Most observers continue to believe there will not be a violent reaction on the constitutional issue, and there is a sense that many people just want to move on with their lives. However, there is still deep cynicism about ELECAM (which some believe will be controlled by the President), the government's anti-corruption efforts, and the new amendment giving the president immunity (the immunity very broadly covers the scope of the President's responsibilities - Yang's argument that this is somehow limited is difficult for us to understand). Prominent human rights activist Hilaire Kamga is preparing to roll out an "Orange Program" in May which envisions mobilizing the Cameroonian masses to ensure a good

election in 2011 and a peaceful transition. He and others have told us that, despite the challenges, U.S. support for civil society and democracy in Cameroon is more important now than ever.

GARVEY